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ABSTRACT

This report examines the development of one prospective English teacher's thinking about what it means for secondary students to learn literature and what it would mean for her to teach it. The prospective teacher was one of 14 research participants in the "Understanding Literature for Teaching" study of the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (NCRTL). She was interviewed at the beginning and again at the conclusion of her college English program. Each interview covered three areas: her experiences with literature, including within her family and school; her conceptions of literature, including her responses to theories of criticism and analysis of a specific text; and her ideas of teaching literature within specific educational contexts with particular texts. A central issue of her development was her struggle to define morality. She was raised in a home that gave equal weight to all views; in high school she struggled with the possibility of multiple viewpoints and the presence of ambiguity. After she became a "born again" Christian, she valued literature that reflected biblical teaching and moral absolutes, but continued to perceive a place for multiple truths in literature. In college, as she grew in knowledge of authors' craft and tools, she applied this knowledge to her analysis of texts in order to reach their "core" meaning and arrive at a "correct" interpretation of them. She intended to teach her prospective students to do this as well. In her senior year an unplanned pregnancy prompted her to reconsider her rigid positions and try to "look through others' eyes" to learn from them and understand their reasoning. This study concludes that the subject's development regarding literature corresponds to the intellectual and ethical stages of development as described by W. G. Perry (1970) in a study of Harvard undergraduates. This study also acknowledges that studies on women's ways of knowing and understanding provide insights on this subject's ways of viewing the world. (Contains nine references.) (NAV)

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SEARCHING LITERATURE FOR MORAL GUIDANCE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH TEACHER

Margaret M. Malenka[2]

Current reform efforts in teacher education and schools focus on developing students and teachers who are reflective, strategic thinkers capable of critical judgment and problem solving (Holmes Group 1990). For the English community, this has meant highlighting the use of language in constructing knowledge and meaning, reflection and evaluation of language use, and recognition and evaluation of the personal effects of language (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford 1989). Current studies which examine secondary English instruction often address these capacities through a focus on readers' responses to literature and teachers' instructional methods (e.g., Langer 1989; Knoblauch and Brannon). Few explore the development of prospective teachers' understandings of literature and its instruction. Knowledge of how these understandings develop is critical in preparing prospective English teachers to provide instruction which is congruent with reform standards.

This paper examines the development of one prospective English teacher's thinking about what it means for secondary students to learn literature and, therefore, what it would mean for her to teach it. Esther was one of fourteen research participants in the Understanding Literature for Teaching study of the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (McDiarmid 1995). The primary data collection instrument was the Understanding Literature for Teaching interview, which consisted of three sessions of two hours each (see McDiarmid 1995). Esther was interviewed both at the beginning and conclusion of her college English program over three areas: first, her experiences with literature, including within her family and in school; second, her conceptions of literature, including responses to theories

[2]G. W. McDiarmid, Diane Holt-Reynolds, Elizabeth Knepper, and Stephen Smith made contributions to this paper.

of criticism and her analysis of a specific text; and third, her ideas of teaching literature within specific educational contexts with particular texts.

Analysis of Esther's responses to the interview questions and tasks was set in the context of her intellectual and ethical development (Perry 1970). A central aspect of this development was her struggle to define morality, both in terms of societal norms and at a spiritual level. Throughout the interview, Esther continually referred to issues of right and wrong, issues which seemed to also affect her conceptions of literature and literature instruction. Critical to understanding the evolution of Esther's views of literature and teaching literature is appreciating her growth as an ethical and intellectual being in various contexts—home, school, college. In what follows, I trace this evolution and growth and describe her conceptions of literature within each stage of development.

ESTHER THE CHILD

Esther reported that she was raised in a home environment where everyone's beliefs, ideas, and lifestyles were accepted. Her mother tolerated no moral judgments on a person's ethical stance or actions, and Esther was allowed to voice neither criticism nor praise regarding anyone's behavior:

> I had all of this, everybody is right, everybody is okay . . . You can't say, "This is right" or "This is wrong" . . . You can't tell anybody they are right. Because then you will be telling somebody else they are wrong. There was no approval in there.

Even as a child, Esther was frustrated with this philosophy which gave equal weight to all positions. Without parental prescriptions of ethical behavior, Esther felt that she struggled alone to decide what was right, what to think, how to act. Finding limited opportunities to explore these questions at home, she searched for occasions to address them in school.

Esther attended an ungraded elementary school where students worked according to their abilities alongside other students of various ages. Compatible with her mother's beliefs, this school environment supported maximizing children's educational choices. For example, Esther reported that students who preferred math

over other subjects were free to spend all day exploring mathematical concepts. For Esther, this freedom meant unlimited time spent reading a wide range of books in the school library. Her love for reading, which began at home with a family that valued books, was thus reinforced and enhanced here.

Esther's teachers monitored her reading by asking open-ended questions regarding her interpretations and reactions to texts. Esther, however, searched for "right" answers and guidance in these comments:

> They encouraged me to talk about what I felt like the book was about . . . They encouraged me to tell feelings and things. I'd say, "I think this is about..." and then they would say, if they felt I was wrong, "Why do you say that?" . . . They didn't let me get away with anything.

Esther's need for knowledge of "right" and "wrong" apparently remained urgent in this early school setting where she was allowed great latitude in selecting, reading, and responding to literature. She construed general types of questions as evaluative or judgmental ones, seeming to believe that those in authority were cognizant of "truth" and would guide her in its discovery.

When Esther was in fifth grade, her parents divorced, and she moved with her mother and brother from the rural setting in which they had lived to a large city. Esther was enrolled in a more traditional school with graded classrooms, where she was ahead in reading but behind in math: "I was a much better reader and speller than all the other fifth graders, and so I would just whip through these things . . . I was horrible at math."

Esther was apparently provided with a clearer path towards "right" answers in this school setting; however, these guidelines proved unsatisfactory. For example, in sixth grade, Esther meticulously followed the teacher's outline in writing a book report, but both she and the teacher were disappointed with the result. Although Esther was angry about the grade she received, she realized her writing lacked creativity and was boring. This was perhaps the first time she experienced an authority's "right" as "wrong." However, it would be several years before Esther accepted the possibility of multiple truths and an uncertain authority.

ESTHER THE TEENAGER

Esther's pursuit of specific guidelines for life became desperate during her teenage years. She told me that she indulged in alcohol, drugs, and even attempted suicide to elicit a reaction from her mother that would establish a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors: "I tried really hard to get disapproval. My mom was just like, 'She's just going through a phase.'"

During this time, Esther reported that she read books that reflected her dark moods, turning to stories of the macabre and the supernatural. Poe was a favorite author. She also searched books for the moral prescriptions her mother did not provide. She lighted upon texts of ancient Egyptian religions as the basis of her own system of beliefs. Her teenage purposes in reading literature were thus extremely personal. She seemed to be looking for reflections of herself and a solution to her quest for moral absolutes:

> I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was right or wrong . . . Mysticism was a way to deal with that, I think. My own way, nobody had the right to infringe upon it . . . [I read] anything that had to do with anti-Christian; anything very, very anti-Christian . . . Love and all that stuff; I was very, very angry and unhappy with some of that.

Not until tenth grade did a teacher successfully challenge Esther's need for right answers. Previously, Esther had come to believe that English teachers wanted students to reiterate the "truths" which they taught in class. Even though many of these teachers probably had explored and valued various student opinions, Esther did not recognize these efforts. In her tenth-grade English class, she finally met a teacher whom she felt valued students' opinions so much that she sometimes found them to be "truer" than her own: "[She] would tell us what she thought, but if somebody had something to say, she would definitely listen, and she would be like, 'Oh, really?' You know, it was almost like we could change her mind. It was really neat."

Esther still looked for right answers, but now she accepted that more than one right answer was possible and began to enjoy such ambiguity. Perhaps more significantly, she also considered that, on occasion, students' ideas were as valid as

an authority's ideas. This change in Esther's thinking reflects significant movement through Perry's stages of intellectual and ethical development (Perry 1970), which I describe more fully in a later section of this article.

ESTHER THE CHRISTIAN

During Esther's junior year in high school, a classmate, noting how unhappy and confused Esther was, suggested she turn to Jesus and the Bible. Esther listened to this friend and became a "born again" Christian. She felt she was finally "at peace," with very clear views of morality and religion. She believed that the Bible contained the answers she had been seeking and that life-styles or beliefs not sanctioned in the Bible were wrong.

This continued to be the case even when Esther encountered new ideas in the variety of texts she read in college. She valued literature that reflected Biblical teaching, answered moral questions, and provided further guidance. (It is interesting to note that when I gave her the opportunity to select a pseudonym for this study she selected "Esther," referring to the Old Testament character with the same name.) Esther's purposes for reading were to understand herself and others and to find directions for living. How strongly this reading influenced her lifestyle is apparent in her reaction to reading *Passion and Purity* by Elisabeth Elliot, a text that advocates abstaining from sex until marriage. Consequent to reading this text, Esther broke off her engagement to her fiancé. She had characterized him during our first interview as a "carnal Christian," someone who wanted to have sex before marriage.

However, despite the appeal of moral absolutes, Esther did not totally abandon her developing sense of the possibility of multiple truths. She strongly believed that others had the right to differing views: "People are allowed to have different opinions . . . I don't accept Hinduism. But I don't condemn every Hindu that I see, and I would never not accept a friendship from one."

Esther also perceived a place for multiple truths in literature. She noted that readers bring their own experiences to a text and so "find different things in it." At the same time, Esther viewed each text as having a "core" meaning, a meaning determined by the author. Esther viewed reading not only as a personal response but

also as an attempt to come as close as possible to this "core," to discover the author's intended message. However, she perceived the author's true meaning as ultimately unattainable: "I don't think anybody has a facility to dig the absoluteness out of anything."

Esther used the knowledge of authors' craft and tools she gained in English classes to come as close as possible to the "correct" interpretations of texts. She applied this knowledge to a second reading of a text to check the validity of her initial reactions:

> And then I'll go through it again and ask myself questions . . . Why did I have a reaction and where did I have it? And what brought that up? And is there support for it? Because sometimes I'll be like, "Ahhh," I just had this huge reaction and then I'll go back and that's not what they meant. They weren't trying to get at that.

This aspect of reading literature—examination of an author's choices in constructing text to affirm or disaffirm the reader's initial reactions—was to Esther the heart of both understanding and enjoying literature. She based her analysis of text on an author's use of language and on literary devices such as irony and characterization. When I asked her to explain to a hypothetical friend why she would "pick apart" a text, Esther described her rationale for analysis:

> I could not enjoy this ignorantly . . . I'm going to pick it apart because I need to understand it and pick it apart. If you can't see the irony and you can't see how somebody uses characterization, how somebody clashes, if you can't pick out the hero and the villain, then you're not going to enjoy it . . . I will pick it apart, and I will talk about it. And I will enjoy it more because I talked about it or wrote about it.

Esther stated that she believed high school students also think about text in this way, that they form opinions based on authors' choices. She assumed that they just may not realize the cause of their opinions or possess the appropriate literary vocabulary to describe their analysis. Note as well the implicit assumption that stories include "heroes" and "villains," signaling her continuing preoccupation with literature as a venue for the struggle of good and evil.

ESTHER THE PROSPECTIVE TEACHER

Esther's personal construction of the dual purposes of reading literature—to analyze the technical features of a text in search of the author's intended meaning and to provide moral guidance—was reflected in her discussions of teaching. Esther did not indicate an awareness of other purposes for reading, nor did she discuss alternative methods of interpretation. She had discovered moral certitude in her personal life and the means to "right" interpretations in her literary one. She planned to instruct students in each of these areas. Esther's moral and ethical stance was reflected in her conceptions of literature; now it also impacted on her views of teaching literature.

Esther planned to help students discover the "true" or "core" meaning of texts. She told me she would select texts that students would find enjoyable, prompt their initial interpretations, and then ask them to "substantiate" these interpretations by referring back to the text. Within this context, Esther would teach students the use of analytical tools which would aid in the discovery of the author's intended meaning. If students arrived at an interpretation different from her own, Esther stated that she would have to accept this alternative if they could demonstrate that the text justified their interpretations. This somewhat reluctant acceptance of varied student interpretations indicate her continued, tentative acceptance of the possibility of multiple truths.

Esther was also prepared to provide students with answers to ethical and moral questions, to differentiate right from wrong. An example of this is her response to a thirteen-year-old boy's questions about kissing on the first date:

> Well there should be a line there somewhere for a thirteen-year-old male. He should know that it's right, or he should know that it's wrong. There is none of this fuzzy line stuff . . . I told him that was wrong, and I told him why. And he was like, "Oh. Okay."

Esther found these moral guidelines for herself in literature and assumed that students would also follow the examples they read in texts. While she had learned about analytical tools in English classes, she had discovered personal answers in texts on her own. Likewise, while she planned to explicitly teach analytical tools to high

school students, she assumed they would also look for and find personal answers in texts on their own. Her responsibility, therefore, became one of ensuring that students received the "correct" moral messages from literature as they read without her guidance. She planned to guarantee this by carefully selecting the texts which students would read. Esther would avoid texts which might contain negative influences and, so, protect students from "wrong" moral messages: "[I did not select] *Lord of the Flies* [because it] gives too many ideas to too many people . . . *The Color Purple* involves a lesbian relationship, and I would not teach it for that reason. Straight and simple."

During her senior year, however, events conspired to cause Esther to reconsider her censorious inclinations.

ESTHER THE PROSPECTIVE PARENT

An unplanned pregnancy during Esther's senior year profoundly influenced her intellectual and ethical development as well as her conceptions of teaching. In her mind, she had violated the rule stipulating the "wrongness" of sex before marriage, but she was happy and others accepted her without judgment. In her particular situation, "wrong" seemed to be "right." Esther felt that her pregnancy prompted her to be less self-centered. She now tried to "look through" others' eyes to learn from them and to understand their reasoning.

This change in Esther's thinking spilled over into her views about her probable behavior as a teacher. She began to imagine that she might, in teaching, explicitly address moral issues found in texts. Rather than focusing instruction on the application of analytical tools, she now planned to emphasize how the insights and ideas in a text might apply to students' personal lives. She was eager to include discussions of what she believed to be negative situations. She would help her students look through the eyes of the characters so they would understand the complexities of a particular situation from the inside. Esther would now teach *The Color Purple*: "I would say, 'What do you think is going on with her to allow her to accept love and attention from a woman and not a man? Do you think it's possibly because the only man in her life sexually abused her?'"

I last spoke with Esther shortly before the expected birth of her child. Given the trajectories of her development, this powerful experience may prompt further changes in both her intellectual and ethical stances and in her thinking about teaching and learning literature.

STAGES OF INTELLECTUAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

The development of Esther's thinking regarding literature closely corresponds to the intellectual and ethical states of development as described by Perry (1970). In a descriptive study conducted with Harvard undergraduates, Perry traced the forms and structures of students' thinking during their four years in college. He discovered progressive patterns in their responses to interview prompts, particularly in regards to intellectual and ethical relativism. Perry and his colleagues used the interview data to develop a scheme which described this progression, assigning nine position numbers to various stages of development. Position 1, Basic Duality, reflected a polar outlook in which the student viewed the world as right versus wrong; Position 9, Developing Commitments, reflected a recognition of multiplicity and responsibility for evolving choices.

Esther's perception of her childhood environment reflected Perry's Position 4, Multiplicity Correlate, where "everyone has a right to his own opinion" (Perry 1970, p. 97). Esther, however, was apparently not ready either emotionally or intellectually for this stage, which she reported to experience as ambiguous and precarious. Instead, she sought to categorize her experiences and textual interpretations in the right versus wrong mode of Position 1, Basic Duality. She looked toward authority figures for "right" answers, which she was certain they possessed but often seemed to be withholding from her.

As Esther grew physically and intellectually, she began to realize that not everything could be reduced to absolutes. Her high school English teacher urged her towards Position 5, Relativism Correlate, where knowledge is perceived as contextual and multiplicity is legitimate. This teacher's willingness to consider and sometimes accept students' ideas which differed from her own seemed to prompt Esther to

accept and appreciate the possibility of both multiple truths and an uncertain authority.

Shortly following her exposure to this way of thinking about multiplicity, Esther appeared to revisit Position 1, Basic Duality. She embraced a right versus wrong, good versus bad way of thinking that grew out of her interpretation of Christianity. Finally, a significant personal experience prompted her return to Position 5, Relativism Correlate, where she attempted to "look through" others' eyes to contextualize life experiences and experiences in literature. I also suspect that further growth, through the personal commitments which characterize the next of Perry's stages, is likely.

There are, of course, other lenses through which to view Esther's ways of perceiving the world. Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986) contend that women's ways of meaning-making include dimensions which the men of Perry's study do not experience. Their study included questions designed to elicit responses which would coincide with Perry's positions as well as questions developed by Gilligan (1982), who studied gender-related differences in moral development, and Kohlberg (1984).

Belenky and her colleagues found that women's responses to their questions did not fit neatly into Perry's scheme. Building on Gilligan's assertion that women define themselves by their relationships, they noted that this emphasis often influenced their interviewees' perspectives of authority and their life decisions. Belenky and her colleagues designated five positions from which women view the world: silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. It is possible to understand Esther as operating from a stance of procedural knowledge, using personal experiences and external rules as her guides in life. Her views of literature paralleled what Belenky termed "connected," or personal procedural knowledge, in her use of texts to learn moral lessons and gain insights about herself and others, and "separate,"or impersonal procedural knowledge, in her use of literary devices to discover the author's meaning. Like the women described in this study, Esther's relationship with others influenced and shaped her thinking. She shared with many of them one key circumstance: the

anticipated birth of her child was a significant transition point in her life. However, unlike the women described in Belenky's study, Esther's thinking seems less shaped by her responses to authority than by her perception that authority was missing from her life.

Belenky and her colleagues provide added insight into Esther's thinking without negating her positions in Perry's scheme. In fact, when Perry compared women's and men's responses, he found similar patterns; Belenky's study was designed to discover additional themes and outlooks specific to women. However, the perspectives Belenky describes are not developmental stages and are primarily limited to women. Perry's depiction of cognitive and moral progress provides a developmental framework which appears to apply to both men and women. His scheme raises several important questions for English departments and teacher education programs.

If English majors' views of literature and Perry's stages of ethical and intellectual development are related, as my analysis of Esther's story suggests, can colleges provide courses or experiences which will help move prospective teachers along these stages of development? If yes, what form should these take? Or, if this development is the process of natural maturation, can colleges complement and support this progression? How can the study of literature be structured to reinforce or promote ethical and intellectual growth?

Esther appeared to struggle between an emotional and moral need for absolutes and an intellectual urge towards conditional, multiple truths. How can colleges provide a safe academic environment which both eases affective concerns and promotes cognitive growth? More specifically, how can the teaching and learning of literature be set within this type of context? And how can prospective teachers be prepared to also consider the ethical and intellectual needs and stages of development of their future secondary students?

Researchers at the Understanding Literature for Teaching study, of which Esther was a participant, are exploring at least one kind of response to these questions. During the course of our extensive interviewing, we noted that the research participants often struggled with the questions and tasks we laid before

them. We had the opportunity to observe how their thinking changed and evolved as they considered the various aspects of certain interview prompts. For example, initially, most of the students had clear, direct answers to the question "What is literature?" However, as we presented them with artifacts which confronted their assumptions (e.g., a cartoon might challenge a definition of literature as fictional entertainment), many reconceptualized their responses to the question. We are currently exploring ways in which initial responses reflect particular stages of development and how the interview prompts may urge participants beyond their original stances.

This research will inform English departments and teacher education programs regarding prospective teachers' thinking, with implications for curriculum. Further study of prospective English teachers' intellectual and ethical development is critical for their preparation as effective secondary literature teachers.

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